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The Young Rough Riders Weekly

MOST FASCINATING WESTERN STORIES

Ted checked his horse and looked down. There, before him on the grass, with his pale face upturned toward the sky, lay his foe, Earl Rossiter, beaten and betrayed in his greatest scheme.

The Young Rough Riders Weekly

Most Fascinating Western Stories

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TED STRONG'S TRIUMPH;

OR,

The End of the Contest.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

AT EAGLE ROCK.

It was crisp, autumn weather, and up among the hills, above the lower, pine-covered slopes, it was almost cold. The party of young people, who were climbing one of the peaks of the Big Smoky Mountains, did not seem to mind the cold, however. The stirring exercise of the climb kept them warm, and the girls of the party looked as rosy and blooming as though they had never felt cold in their lives.

Tom Black, a young college man, who had recently hired Sunset Ranch and was entertaining a party of guests there, had started the present expedition. With him were two of his friends, Sam Reading and Will Payne, also young fellows seeing the West for pleasure; Tom Black's sister Lucy, Daisy Miller and Louise Rossiter. Earl Rossiter, the boy who owned the Sunset Ranch and was still staying there, although he had rented it to Black's party, was unable to come on the trip. He was ill with a high fever. A short time before he had fallen down in a fainting fit when about to entertain a party of business friends, and when he was restored to consciousness he had raved like a maniac. A doctor who was called in to attend him said that he had received some nervous shock recently, which had come near to rendering him insane, and that it would be a long time before he could be restored to health again. In the meantime, he must have perfect quiet

and careful nursing, and he was now spending the days and nights on his back in bed, under a doctor's care, allowed to see no one or to do anything which would excite him in any way.

In the meantime, the other young people at the house had been amusing themselves in various ways, and Tom Black had at length suggested the present expedition to Eagle Rock, one of the higher peaks of the mountains which were not far away from the Sunset Ranch, as a pleasant way of spending one of the clear autumn days. He had invited Ted Strong and the others of the young rough riders to join them in their expedition, but the boys up at the Black Mountain Ranch were far too busy for any picnicking at that particular season of the year. It was time for them to sell their herds, and they were all busy making a round-up and starting the cattle on the trail into Montana, where they were to be sold for beef at the Blackfoot Indian reservation.

"That's Eagle Rock above us," said Tom Black, pointing up at the summit which they had still to climb, and which looked a great way off to the girls, who were already somewhat tired after their stiff climb.

"Oh, dear!" said Lucy Black, "why couldn't we have come all this way in the wagon? I am tired of climbing over all these rocks."

"Couldn't bring the wagon up here," said Black. "We brought it just as far as we could, but we had to leave it behind when we struck these rocky foothills. If we had followed the winding trail up we should never have been able to get anyway near Eagle Rock, and that is the peak that we want to see."

The three young men were helping the three girls up over the larger rocks and stones, and the whole party was making rather slow progress. Reading, who was a well-built, dark-haired chap, was something of a college athlete and able to climb a little better than the others. Beside him was Louise Rossiter, who, owing to her love for outdoor sport and her life in the West, was a great deal less tired and fagged than the other girls.

They were rapidly distancing the others and finally, to Reading's great joy, they turned a rock which shielded them from the view of the rest of the party. Reading, in his association latterly with Louise Rossiter, whom he had met frequently since he came to the West, had become quite smitten with her. Louise was altogether unconscious of this, and in her anxiety to reach the summit of Eagle Rock, and her enjoyment of the climb, she didn't notice that they were getting so far ahead of the others.

As they turned the big rock, they started on a steeper ascent. Reading watched his companion admiringly as she clambered up over the rocks.

"By Jove!" he said, "it is not often that one finds a girl like you. Most of the girls I know would have given out before we had gone half this distance, but you are as strong and athletic as a boy, and besides that you have lost none of your feminine charm."

"I don't need your arm, Mr. Reading," said Louise, drawing away from him, "and as for my being athletic, any girl would be athletic if she spent most of her time outdoors."

"But few girls would be like you," said Reading, pausing to look into her eyes.

Louise avoided the look. She did not altogether like Reading's manner. She was not at all alarmed by it as Daisy Miller might have been. Louise was stronger and more confident than Daisy and she was perfectly sure of her own ability to keep Reading in his place. She had noticed that Reading was more attentive than she liked on several occasions, and now that they were alone she saw that he was walking very close to her and trying to assist her over the rough places by catching hold of her arm.

"I wish Ted Strong were here," she said, suddenly.

Reading scowled for a moment and then when she turned toward him resumed a smiling face.

"I wish he were, too," he said. "I admire him a great deal from what I have seen of him. But there is not much chance of meeting him here, is there? He is away off in Montana by this time."

"I don't know about that," said Louise. "He went to Montana by the cattle trail which skirts the foot of these mountains, but the shortest cut back, unless he takes the train, is across the mountains here, and he might come this way for the sake of any game he might pick up about here. I shouldn't wonder if we met him. I was just hoping we might meet some of the young rough riders when we decided to go out on this excursion."

Had Louise seen Reading's face at this moment she would have smiled. Reading wore a very unpleasant look, and it was with the very idea of irritating him that she had spoken of the possibility of meeting Ted Strong and the young rough riders up here in the mountains. She wanted to discourage Reading's attentions as much as possible and she thought that this was as good a way as any. But Reading was not to be discouraged so easily. He hastened after Louise and reached forth to help her over a pile of shattered rock.

The girl bounded ahead of him, and in trying to reach for her Reading slipped and fell. Louise heard him fall, but did not look back.

"I hope he hasn't hurt himself," she thought, "but I am not going to turn back after him. It gives me a good chance to get away from him and up to the top of Eagle Rock ahead of the others."

She ran ahead at a good pace, climbing up the steep slope around which the footpath wound at a pace at which Reading himself would have found some difficulty in traveling. She heard her companion scrambling to his feet and coming after her as fast as he could.

"Wait a minute, Miss Rossiter," panted Reading. "Let me catch up with you to help you over those stones."

Louise laughed softly to herself and ran on all the faster.

"Let him catch me if he can," she said to herself. "I don't want to be alone with him here, and I want to get to the top of that rock and have a good look around at the country before the others come up with us. They must be a long way behind now."

Louise ran on, out of breath by this time, but never stopping for a moment. She heard Reading panting and scrambling along behind her, and she felt as if it were a race between the two. She saw Eagle Rock towering close over her head now and already she was halfway up to the summit. She did not expect to reach the summit itself, but a narrow ledge that lay about twenty feet above the highest point, and to which the narrow path which she was following led. It would be impossible for her to get to the very top, for, on that side, the face of the cliff for the last twenty feet was absolutely perpendicular, although, on the other side, it was possible to scale it.

At length Louise found herself at her goal and threw herself down on the moss-covered ledge, breathing deeply, her face aglow with pleasure and excitement.

"This is beautiful!" she exclaimed. "It's fully worth the climb."

She gazed with sparkling eyes at the scene that was spread below her. Except for the jagged peak twenty feet above her head, she was on the highest piece of ground for miles around. The air about her was cold bracing and delightfully pure. Below her, far away she could see the level prairie with a stretch of timber running across it, marking the line of a watercourse. A little nearer were the dark tops of the pine trees which clothed the lower slopes, and still further up, almost beneath her it seemed, was the winding path by which

she herself had ascended and up which she could see the others still struggling, slowly and painfully. Reading was not in sight, as he was hidden from her by the last turn in the path which he had just rounded. The beauty of the scene, the exhilaration of the exercise and the air which ran through the blood like wine, made Louise forget for the moment the fact that she had been running away from some one. She threw herself luxuriously down on the mossy ledge and gave herself up to the keen enjoyment of her position without a care or thought for anything else.

In the meantime, Reading was perspiring and fuming as he made his way up the path. His tumble, and the fact that Louise had laughed as she ran away from him, had put him in a towering rage. He could not help admiring the fleetness and agility of the girl, and he did his best to catch her before she got to the top.

His best was not good enough, however, and he had to make the whole of the climb alone, consoling himself with the reflection that it would be some time yet before the others caught up, and that in the meantime he would have Louise all to himself.

"She pretends to be such a blunt, straightforward girl, without any coquettishness about her," he panted, as he ran along. "What did she run up ahead to the top of that rock for? Just to be alone with me for a while and to tease me. I'll show her. She can't have fun with me just as she pleases. She is just as bad as the rest of them, and just as much of a flirt, too, only she hides it more. It's these girls who pretend to have no use for flirting who are the worst. She thinks there is no one like this Ted Strong. Well, he is safely out of the way now. The others are out of sight behind that turn and it will be a good half hour before they get here. In the meantime I have my blue-eyed lady all to myself. Ah!"

Reading's last exclamation was called from him by the sight of Louise stretched on the moss and wrapped up in her golf cloak, looking down at the scene below. As he came out on the ledge beside her, he thought he had never seen such a beautiful girl in his life. Her heightened color, and the sparkle of enjoyment that shone in her eyes, the white gleam of her teeth as they showed between her slightly parted lips, and the strands of golden hair that the wind was blowing across her face, made her a striking and beautiful picture.

She turned her head a little as Reading stepped upon the ledge.

"Isn't this view grand?" she said.

"Lovely!" said Reading.

He was not looking at the scenery at all, but at Louise.

Louise neither looked up nor spoke, but remained as she was, gazing out at the country below and enjoying the delight of outdoor life to the full. Reading dropped on the moss beside her, still staring at her.

"I always did like blue-eyed girls," he said.

"What has that to do with the scenery," said Louise, without turning.

"I'm not looking at the scenery."

"What did you come up here for, then?"

"To be alone with you."

As he made this last remark, Reading reached forward and caught at Louise's hand, which was lying close beside him. He only held it for a moment. Louise drew it away sharply and leaped to her feet.

"What do you mean?" she said, staring at Reading. "I didn't come up here to be alone with you, let me tell you that."

"That bluff will do for the others down below, but it won't go with me."

"It will have to go with you. Don't come any nearer to me."

"You are quite an actress, aren't you? But what's

the use of keeping up this masquerade when no one else can see us?"

"What do you mean?"

"Here, I am determined to have one kiss from you before the others come up."

"How dare you talk to me that way?"

"I dare it very easily. You have led me a pretty chase up this hill, and I'm not going to be bluffed now. I've met lots of girls before, and let me tell you, Louise, that you are about the prettiest I have ever seen."

"Miss Rossiter is the name you are to call me by."

"Well, Miss Rossiter, then. But by whatever name you go by, I am going to have a kiss from you before the others find us here. Come on, now; be agreeable. I am going to have it anyway."

He made a step toward Louise, who backed away from him toward the face of the cliff. She was beginning to be a little frightened now. As she looked into the face of the young man who was confronting her she saw that the worst part of his nature was uppermost and that he was so excited and determined that he had forgotten almost what he did. He reached for her and again she eluded him. Then he caught her hand and drew her toward him. Louise struggled to free herself, but found herself caught in a grip which she could not break. She was ordinarily a wonderfully self-reliant girl, but when Reading grasped her wrist and she found that she could not get herself free, she was frightened. A moment later he had clasped her round the waist and was trying to kiss her. Louise screamed and struggled. She could not fight away from this brute, who had all his passions excited by this time, and she knew that the others were still a little distance off. It seemed to her that she would prefer casting herself over the cliff to having Reading kiss her, and she screamed at the top of her voice. Reading was so engaged in holding the struggling girl that he did not see a rope which was lowered down the face of the cliff behind him, nor a figure which descended by it. A moment later he was struck a stunning blow on the jaw and felled to the earth.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIGHT AT EAGLE ROCK.

The figure which had descended by the face of the cliff was that of Ted Strong. As Louise had hoped, he had crossed through the pass in the Smoky Mountains and that very morning had gone to climb to the summit of Eagle Rock. Kit Summers had gone with him, the other boys remaining in camp with the horses. The two boys reached the topmost point of the rock just as the struggle between Louise and Reading commenced below them.

They had heard the screams and Ted, peering over, had discerned the form of his girl friend struggling in the grasp of some man. It was the work of an instant to sling out his lariat, which he had carried with him, and bid Kit Summers make it fast to a projection in the rock while he descended hand over hand. He did not pause to see who it was that was handling Louise in this rough fashion, but had struck out at him with all his strength. Reading rolled over on the ground as though he had been a tenpin, and Louise, staggering back, looked with delighted surprise into the face of the young rough rider.

"Oh, Ted," she said, "I was just hoping for you and praying for you. I didn't know what to do."

Reading was scrambling to his feet by this time, his face furious. He was a boy with a hot and overbearing temper, and at the present moment it had broken all bounds. He stepped toward Ted, swinging his hands in front of him.

"You young scoundrel!" he snarled, "sneaking behind me and striking at me when I was not looking.

I'll make you pay for that. I'll make you sorry for that."

Reading was rather taller than Ted and of wiry and athletic build. He had gained a considerable reputation as a boxer in college, and was in such a towering temper at the present moment that he would have killed Ted Strong had he had the chance.

Ted was fully as angry as Reading, but he did not show his wrath in the same manner as the college man. His brown eyes were steady and cool, and a slight smile seemed to play about his lips as he stepped forward to meet Reading.

"Please stand a little to one side, Louise," he said, in a calm, cool voice. Reading flung himself upon him.

Louise had seen Ted in many positions of danger before now. She had seen him fighting for his life on the plains against a gang of outlaws, almost within the grasp of a wild cat that had sprung at him, swaying on the seat of a buckboard behind a runaway team, but she had never been so frightened for his safety as she was at the present moment. The two boys were fighting on a narrow ledge of rock from which, on one side, dropped a sheer precipice. A misstep might send either one of them to their death, and there was a look of absolute animal fury in Reading's countenance as he rushed at Ted that terrified her. She was drawn back against the wall of the cliff to be out of their way, with her hands clasped in front of her, her eyes staring wide, and her face pale as death. She saw Reading rush madly at the young rough rider, swinging wildly with both hands. She watched with a frightened gasp as Ted, with a lightning movement, dodged one of the blows and countered on Reading's chest. Then Reading's other hand shot out and struck Ted heavily on the round of the neck. She saw him stagger beneath the force of the blow, and Reading rushed upon him.

Although Ted was staggering he was as cool and steady as ever. He dropped forward slightly and shot out his right fist. It caught Reading full on the nose, and the big fellow went staggering back, with blood streaming from both his nostrils. Then he turned and came at Ted once more. Ted fought him off, landing two straight lefts and a right jab, and dodging a furious left hook that would have knocked him out had it caught him on the chin. Reading was not to be stopped, however. He was fighting like a fiend now, absolutely forgetful of his own fury, and showering blows upon the young rough rider.

He gave a wild yell of triumph as he saw Ted backing away toward the edge of the cliff ,and flung himself forward at him.

Smack! Ted's left shot out viciously, and Reading went staggering to the ground with a cut in his lip and two of his front teeth loosened. He was up like a flash and at Ted again.

He struck wildly and blindly, but one of his blows struck Ted on the head and sent him to the ground. He clambered to his feet as quickly as he could, but Reading had grappled with him before he had quite arisen. For a moment they tugged and strained, and then Ted managed to get his feet firmly placed. Reading's face showed that he had forgotten everything but his own mad passion. He was doing his best to force Ted over the edge of the cliff, and for a moment it seemed that he would succeed. Louise could see the two forms tottering on the very brink of the precipice. She screamed faintly and closed her eyes. When she opened them again the two forms were still struggling, but Ted, by sheer main strength it seemed, had managed to force his opponent back a little way from the edge. The next instant Ted's leg was crooked around behind Reading's, his whole weight and strength was put forth in a forward lunge, and Reading was cast bodily through the air, landing with a sickening thud

on his back on the mossy surface of the ledge of rock. He lay there, bleeding and apparently unconscious, and Ted Strong, drawing back a step, looked at him. The same steady smile was still playing about Ted's mouth and the same look of confidence shining from his brown eyes. Almost at the same instant Kit Summers came swinging down the lariat that was stretched up the face of rock and stood beside them.

"Hello, Louise!" he said. "Ted, that was a dandy backfall. I was watching the scrap from the top, and just at the right moment was going to drop a lariat over the head of this man. He seemed to be rather anxious to push you over the edge there, but I saw that you could handle him all right."

Ted paid no attention at this moment. He stepped toward the side of Louise, who was very pale and swaying as though she were about to faint. She gladly clasped Ted's arm and clung to him.

"Oh, Ted!" she said, "I thought you were going over."

Ted slipped his arm about her and supported her in that fashion for a moment. Then she drew upright and stepped away from him.

"I am all right now," she said. "I am ashamed of myself for feeling faint in that fashion."

"Who is this mut, anyhow?" said Kit, looking at the prostrate form of Reading.

Reading had regained his consciousness and was scrambling slowly to his feet. He was a sorry sight. Blood was still dripping from his nose, and his cut upper lip was swollen until it was more than twice the size of his nether one. There was a discoloration under one eye which, within an hour, would develop into a very ugly black mark. His clothes were torn, and there was a break in his flesh, over his jawbone, where Ted had struck him for the first time.

He looked at the two khaki-clad boys, at the ropes dangling up the side of the cliff and at the girl who was standing between them.

"You'll know who I am before I get through with you," he snarled. "What do you mean by attacking me that way?"

"You know very well what I meant," said Ted, sharply. "I want you to apologize at once to Miss Rossiter."

"Apologize nothing!"

Ted took a step toward him and looked sternly into his face.

"Don't strike him again, Ted," pleaded Louise. "He is sorry for what he did now."

"I know who you are now," said Ted, "because I recognize your face. You are a friend of Tom Black, who is a friend of mine, and on that account I will treat you with more consideration than I would have shown you otherwise. I see that Tom and the rest of the party are coming up the hill. If you apologize to this young lady, and she accepts your apology, I will say nothing about what happened, and you may explain the condition of your face in any way you see fit. The rest have not seen what has been going on up here."

"I am willing to accept his apology," said Louise. "I think that he has been punished enough."

"If you don't apologize," continued Ted, "and if you so much as dare to look disrespectfully at Miss Rossiter, I will thrash you within an inch of your life and then publish forth my reasons for so doing."

"Why should I apologize?" growled Reading.

"For your rudeness."

"When you attacked me without any warning."

"Speak quickly. I won't wait much longer."

"I apologize," said Reading, in sulky tones.

"Do you accept the apology, Louise?"

"Certainly, if he means it."

"If he doesn't mean it, I'll break his neck," said hot-headed Kit Summers.

"I mean it, otherwise I wouldn't have said it," said Reading.

At this moment Tom Black and Daisy Miller appeared on the edge. Tom stared at the two khaki-clad forms in amazement. He had not expected to see them there. Daisy's pretty face flushed with pleasure at sight of Ted Strong.

"Hello!" said Black, "you fellows must have dropped from the clouds."

"We were coming through by the pass," said Ted, "and we climbed Eagle Rock from the other side. The rest of the young rough riders are camped in the pass about a mile from here. We intend to ride in to Black Mountain this afternoon."

Black's eye fell on Reading, who was trying to wipe the blood from his face and make himself more presentable generally.

"Great Cæsar's ghost!" he cried, "what ever happened to you, Sam? You look as if you had been run through a carpet-beating factory."

"I fell on the rocks coming up," said Reading, sulkily. "I don't see that it is anyone's business but my own how I look."

"Of course not," said Black, good-humoredly, "and I can't say that I blame you for getting grouchy when you've had a tumble like that."

"I'll help you dress it," said Ted. "I generally carry some antiseptic gauze in my pocket, as I am likely to get cuts and wounds myself now and then."

At first Reading looked as if he were going to refuse Ted's offer of help, but he thought better of it and accepted. Kit and Louise stood by without a word and saw Ted dressing the wounds of the man he had been fighting a short time before. As for the others, they had seen nothing of the fight and had no idea that Reading had been injured otherwise than by a tumble on the rocks.

CHAPTER III.

READING AND ROSSITER.

"I hear you met Ted Strong to-day."

The speaker was Earl Rossiter. He was sitting in bed propped up with a number of pillows. Reading was seated upon a chair by the bedside and the two were playing cards. Both of the two boys had a great liking for games of chance, and as they were the only people in the house who possessed that liking, Reading frequently came into Rossiter's room to gamble with him. Rossiter was still weak as the result of the fever he had gone through, but his mind was as clear as ever and he noticed the bruised face and sulky demeanor that Reading wore this particular afternoon. He also noticed a look of hatred that came into his eyes at the mention of Ted Strong's name.

"Yes," said Reading, looking up at Rossiter's pale face and then glancing down at the cards again, "I met him to-day. But I don't want to talk at present. I want to play cards. What has Ted Strong to do with the game we are playing?"

"Not a thing," said Rossiter. "I was only remarking that you met him to-day. No harm in that, is there?"

"None whatever."

"You must have been quite surprised to meet him."

"I was."

"You met him up on the top of Eagle Rock."

"Humph!"

There was silence for a moment, broken only by the shuffling of the cards.

"Nice place Eagle Rock," said Earl, at length. "You must have taken an ugly tumble."

"I did."

"Fall far?"

"No, I landed on my face."

"Your face is dreadfully cut. You look as though you had been in a fight."

"I suppose so."

"It's funny how those rocks should mark your face that way."

"Funny to you, I suppose. It isn't quite so funny to me."

"I didn't mean funny, exactly. I meant peculiar. Do you know that some of those marks look as if they had been made by a good, hard fist. They do. That mark below the eye, for instance."

"I suppose it doesn't look very nice. I'm sorry that you didn't speak before. I might have fallen so that my face would have been marked differently so as to suit you better."

"But, honestly," said Earl, "you don't know how much you look like a man who has received a good hiding. If I didn't know you pretty well I would say that you had been fighting with some one and had gotten hurt, but didn't want to speak of it or admit that you had been whipped, and so had invented this yarn about falling on the rocks."

Reading lifted his head and stared Rossiter in the face.

"Look here," he said, "don't you think you have said about enough? I don't think it is any of your business how my face is marked. Just keep quiet about it, will you?"

Rossiter had suspected that Reading and Ted Strong had been fighting. Now he was sure of it. He became silent, and the two played on for a few moments without saying a word. Presently Earl spoke again.

"Ted Strong is a pretty popular fellow around here, especially with the girls."

"So it seems."

"He isn't so popular with the men, however. Outside of his own gang of rough riders, who worship him like a little tin god, I don't believe that he has very many friends."

"Don't you?"

"No. There is something overbearing about the fellow. As for the rough riders, they are a crowd of kids without very much mind of their own, and they like to have some one to walk all over them and to boss them about."

"I suppose so. Take the cards. It's your deal."

"I had a chance to join the young rough riders once. But not for me! None of it in mine! I couldn't stand to have a fellow like Ted Strong walking all over me. I prefer to have a little mind of my own. I don't mind admitting to you privately, of course, that, personally, I have no particular use for Ted Strong. The way people kotow to him about here simply gives me a pain."

"You've had some trouble with him in the past, I suppose," said Reading, suddenly losing interest in the card game.

"Trouble! That's no name for it. I've had all sorts of trouble with him. I tell you how it is. Ted Strong may be all right to people who do everything that he wants them to do, and who recognize him as a leader without any question. But he found me a different sort of a fellow from that, I can tell you. We have had quarrels innumerable in the past, and at the present time I have a lawsuit on over those mining lands that he claims."

"What!" said Reading, in astonishment. "Isn't his title clear to those Yellow River mines?"

"I guess not. I have a better title to those mines than he has, and when I am able to get up out of this bed I'll prove it. I'm not as sick as I appear to be. It suited my fancy to pretend I was in pretty bad shape since I had that fever, but I am going to give them all a surprise some day."

"I hope you win your suit against Ted Strong."

"You don't like him, then?"

"Like him!" Reading ground his teeth together in a fit of rage. "Look at those cuts on my face. Look

at my swollen lip. Don't I look like a sight? Ted Strong is responsible for that! He jumped on me when I wasn't looking up there on Eagle Rock. I was talking to your cousin, Louise, and fooling around with her, and he suddenly hopped in from over the top of the cliff and thumped me one. It wasn't a fair fight. If it had been, I would have pounded the face off him. I was champion welterweight at college, and I'm good for two of him with all his wild West airs. I'll get him yet, don't be afraid, and when I do get him he'll come down pretty hard, you can trust me for that."

"Then you didn't fall, after all?" Earl pretended astonishment, although all along he had a shrewd suspicion that Reading's wounds were the result, not of a tumble, but of a fist fight.

"I fell," said Reading, who had forgotten all his shrewdness in the anger that Earl aroused in him. "I fell all right, but it was after he hit me. You mark my words. I'll get even with that fellow sooner or later. I never forget a grudge. I'm not that kind of a fellow."

Earl Rossiter leaned forward in bed, his eyes blazing, his face flushed, his weakness gone.

"I'm with you," he said. "When you want to lay that fellow out, any way you say, I'm with you. I have been thinking over him while I was lying here for the past few days. My strength has been coming back far faster than they think. I am a match for any of them yet. Here! give me your hand."

Reading extended his palm and received a grip from the apparent invalid that made him wince.

"Holy smoke!" he ejaculated, "you've got a pretty good grip for a sick man."

"Sick nothing. I'm as well now as ever I was. The very thought of getting square on that fellow makes me as strong as a lion. I have a plan in my mind. You don't know what a grudge I have against him, Reading."

"I know what a grudge I have myself."

"Yes, but yours is only a short quarrel. Mine is something of long standing. When I first came West here, I had not done very well at school and I had a crazy idea of turning over a new leaf. This fellow came here and checkmated every move I made. He robbed me of my friends. Ben Tremont, that big fellow who used to win hammer-throwing contests and things like that, used to be a friend of mine, and I had it arranged at one time that he was to help me fight Ted Strong. But Strong has won him over to his side. He's one of the young rough riders and turns up his nose at me now."*

"I've heard of him often," said Reading. "They still talk about his great strength in athletic circles at the colleges."

"He was once a friend of mine," said Earl Rossiter. "You think that you hate this Ted Strong. I tell you, your hatred can't be a tenth of mine. He robbed me of my cousin, Louise. She used to think something of me. She thought I was some good, but since she first saw his cursed face, she has eyes for none but him."

"I am just as anxious to get square with him as you are," said Reading. The almost insane light that burnt in Rossiter's eyes as he spoke of his hatred for the young rough rider alarmed him a little, but the wish for revenge was strong in him and he gladly welcomed Rossiter as an ally. "I am willing to go in with you into any scheme you see fit. I'll stop at nothing. Don't be afraid of me."

Earl Rossiter leaned back on the pillows and looked at him for a long time in silence. Then he raised himself and spoke once more.

"I think that I can trust you," he said, "and I see that you are anxious for revenge as well as I. My

*See No. 2 of the YOUNG ROUGH RIDERS WEEKLY, entitled "Ted Strong's Friends; or, The Trial of Ben Tremont."

plan is to catch Ted Strong and tar and feather him, stampede his cattle, set fire to his ranch house——"

"Hold on there," said Reading; "we can't do all that. The first of those things would be enough. I'm not going to be mixed up in any firing of houses or things like that. I want to lay for Ted Strong and give him a hiding. Tar and feathers would suit me all right. But as for the others—not in mine!"

Rossiter laughed weakly.

"Of course not," he said, "but when I get to thinking of that fellow it makes my blood boil and I forget what I am saying. He is coming over here for a trip and a little visit to-morrow night. Some of the rough riders are coming over with him, but that doesn't make any difference. I can hire a gang of men who will lay for them as we wish and we can square up a lot of old scores when they start home again after dark. Are you in this with me?"

"I am," said Reading.

They shook hands and the compact was sealed.

CHAPTER IV.

A JOLLY EVENING.

There was a dance in progress at the Sunset Ranch, to which all the young rough riders were invited. The tables and chairs were cleared out of one of the long rooms and two fiddlers and some of the Mexican ranchmen, with mandolins and guitars, furnished the orchestra. There were plenty of girls there. Daisy and Louise were both invited and were staying overnight at the ranch house with Mrs. Black. Tom Black's sister was also there, as well as several rosy-cheeked Western girls from Crook City. A set of quadrilles was going on, and Carl Schwartz with his partner, Jane Cummings, a very fat girl whom Carl admired especially, was leading the intricate evolutions of the grand chain. Carl was a little lighter than an elephant, but not quite so graceful, and Bob Martin, who, with Lucy Black, was following him, was beaming with smiles.

"Dot iss der vay to dance id," puffed Carl, spinning his partner round and nearly taking her off her feet.

"Grand chain! Jumpin' sandhills! Make way fer ther grand chain!" yelled Bud Morgan, making a dive for Carl's hand.

Carl backed away as Bud dashed around to the notes of the music with his hair streaming out behind him, and placed a very heavy foot on Beanpole's toe. Beanpole yelled and fell into the middle of the circle, letting go of his partner entirely. He was run into by Ted and Daisy, Louise and Kit, and Tom Black and his partner, and in his efforts to find his way out of the tangle, got his feet mixed up one with the other and fell upon Carl.

Carl relinquished the hand of his fair partner, rolled over in a heap with Beanpole, and the dance ended in shouts of laughter.

"Jumpin' sandhills!" said Bud, "there's a tangle fer ye. Did ye ever see the likes of that?"

"Catch him and drag him off me," said Beanpole, from underneath the German youth. "He is smothering me. I won't live long here."

Ben Tremont, who had not been dancing, but had been lounging quietly at one side, reached out his big hand and pulled Carl to his feet.

Carl stood glaring around at the others with an angry countenance.

"Oof id vas nod vor der laties," he said, "I vould hit some one unt hurt mineselluf."

"I'm glad the ladies are here," said Bob Martin. "I don't want to see you hurt."

"Brace up there, Carl, and go on with the dance," said Kit Summers.

"Der iss too many beobles in der dance," said Carl.

"But Morgan ought to get out. He don'd know how to dance mit his spurs unt boots on."

"Just hobble yer lip there, pardner," said Bud. "I was dancin' jigs from the time I was three years old."

"Der dance iss nod a chig," said Carl.

"I'm going to get out of the dance right here," said Ted, anxious to avoid any sort of a quarrel. "Daisy is tired of dancing and so am I. I guess that there won't be too many couples then."

He and Daisy walked off to seats in a corner and the dance went on.

"I wonder where that boy, Sam Reading, is," said Daisy, who knew nothing of the fight on Eagle Rock. "He looked as if he might be a very good dancer. Don't you think so? I expected to have a dance with him here to-night."

"He isn't feeling well," said Mrs. Black, who was sitting near them. "He had his face badly cut from a fall, as you know, and he decided to stay up in his room."

"Dear me!" said Daisy. "Earl Rossiter is sick, too. I wonder if we couldn't go up and see him? He's sitting up in bed now, and I should think he would like to have people come in and visit him. He must be feeling lonely staying up there by himself so much."

"Sam used to go upstairs and play cards with him a good deal," said Mrs. Black, "and now Sam is laid up himself."

"Let's go upstairs and see Earl," said Daisy. "Kit and Louise can come up with us. They have stopped dancing now."

"Can we go up?" Ted inquired of Mrs. Black.

"Certainly," said that lady. "You'll find his room the first at the head of the stairs."

Kit and Louise came up at that moment and the two couples went up the broad stairs. The door which led into Earl Rossiter's room was closed and no light came from the keyhole or the crack underneath it. Louise tapped at the door with her knuckles, but there was no response. After they had waited a moment, Pancho, Earl's Mexican body servant, suddenly appeared out of another room.

"Señor Rossiter is asleep," he said. "He was tired and wished not to be disturbed."

"I hope we haven't wakened him," said Louise, turning back.

"I wonder where Sam Reading is?" said Daisy.

"I don't want to see him," said Louise, hastily.

"He is also asleep," said Pancho. "Both Señor Rossiter and Señor Reading are asleep."

"Funny they both should be so sleepy-headed," said Kit. "For my part, I don't mind admitting that I am not burning up with any wonderful desire to see either one of them. I could live without setting eyes on either of them for a pretty considerable time."

"It's mean of you to speak that way about them when they are sick," said Daisy.

"Daisy is so tender-hearted she can't bear to think of anyone's suffering," said Louise, looking with beaming eyes upon her friend. "But let's go downstairs. If we stay up here we will wake them up with our talking."

The two girls tripped downstairs together and the boys followed at a slower pace.

"No one except Louise knows anything about your scrap with Reading," said Kit, "and she is one girl in a hundred that way. She can keep a secret."

"She can," said Ted. "I haven't seen Reading since that time up at Eagle Rock. I hope he has no hard feeling against me."

"I'll bet he has a whole lot of it," said Kit. "You humiliated him before a girl he was trying to make a hit with, and you gave him a pretty good trouncing into the bargain. That's something he won't forget in a hurry, you may depend upon that."

"I'm sorry," said Ted; "but he brought it on himself."

"I hear that he and Earl Rossiter have been getting very thick and sociable lately. He spends a good deal of his time with Rossiter playing cards with him."

"So I heard Mrs. Black say."

"Did it ever occur to you that they might be cooking up some plot against you? They are both enemies of yours, you know. And when your enemies get their heads together and become very friendly among themselves it is a good time for you to look out for yourself."

"I'll look out the best I can," said Ted. "For the present, however, I hope that we won't have any trouble. Both Rossiter and Reading are indoors and locked up in their rooms. As for Reading, I don't think that he is a very bad fellow at heart. He is accustomed to have his own way and is rather overbearing, and he has a hot temper."

"I've heard people say the same things about me," laughed Kit.

"They don't know you as I do," said Ted, putting his hand on the shoulder of his friend. "I think you are all right in your warning, and I know by this time that Rossiter is a man that bears watching. He seems to have been driven to desperation."

"You think he is the fellow who pushed you down into that old well and tried to stab you in the haunted barn, don't you?"

"I'm afraid that he is the man," said Ted, "but while he is locked up safe and sound, sick in bed, I don't think we have much to fear from him."

"I guess you are right there," said Kit. "Let's go downstairs and get into the next dance. It's to be a quadrille, I think."

The boys hurried down the stairs just in time to meet a cowboy, who, booted and spurred, had entered the ranch house the moment before.

"I am looking for Mr. Ted Strong," he said, "the boss of the Black Mounting outfit."

"That's me," said Ted. "What do you want me for?"

"Kid McCann, whom yer left in charge of ther ranch, sent me over ter yer," said the man, pulling nervously at his long mustache. "He wants yer back at Black Mounting right away. He's says as how there's an army officer up there waitin' fer ye to make some dicker about some cows he wants ter buy."

"You are not one of our own men," said Ted, sharply. "How did McCann happen to send you down here?"

"The Black Mounting boys were making a round-up, so's this army feller could take a look at whatever cows ye have up thar, by moonlight. None of ther young rough riders was up there at ther time, and so they had no one ter spare. They picked me up as I was ridin' home. I belongs ter ther Flyin' U outfit further north a bit, an' they give me two bits ter ride down here an' get ye."

"I declare that's too bad," said Daisy Miller. "Just don't go, Ted. Let that old army man wait. Why can't he do his business in the daytime?"

"If it's necessary for you to go, you'll have to go, I suppose," said Louise. "But it seems too bad to drag you away from us when we were having a good time."

"Let the fellow wait," said Kit. "If he wants cattle so bad as all that he will be willing to wait till the morning for them. He will think all the more of them when he gets them."

"That wouldn't do, either," smiled Ted. "A ranchman ought to attend to business first, and all the time. Business first and pleasure afterward."

"Then let me go in your place and you stay here," said Kit, eagerly. "You don't often take a night off, and it's time that you had one."

"I'd volunteer to go for you, only I'm so tired," yawned Ben Tremont.

"Let me go," chirped Bob Martin. "As Shakespeare says, 'Let me cast myself into the imminent, deadly breach.'"

"I am sure that I am much obliged to all of you," smiled Ted, "but there's nothing to it. Business is business, and I must go. The rest of you boys can stay a while longer, but don't stay too late, for if this army man buys cattle we may want to make a big round-up to-night." He turned to the messenger, who stood pulling his mustache. "You can ride ahead and tell them I am following. Here is something for your trouble."

The fellow received the silver dollar which Ted handed to him, and stalked off. Ted himself started back to the stables to saddle up Black Bess for his ride to Black Mountain Ranch.

CHAPTER V.

QUEER ACTIONS ON THE PART OF THE MESSENGER.

The man who had brought the message to Ted Strong was a thin, bony fellow with a haggard face. As he rode away from the ranch house into the darkness he cast a glance back at the lighted windows, from which floated forth sounds of music and youthful voices, with a peculiar smile on his lean countenance.

"I fooled that ther young feller about right," he muttered, "and by gum! ef he didn't give me er dollar fer doin' it. Trust Jim Sloane ter fool 'em all when he sets his mind to it."

Jim Sloane, after this remarkable utterance, gave the reins of his broncho a flip. The animal, which was a wild-spirited thing, bounded forward madly, and man and horse went forward through the long buffalo grass as silent and swift as a shadow.

He had headed his animal in the direction of Black Mountain Ranch, and for three miles he kept this direction. These three miles were across the open prairie. Then he dashed through a belt of timber and down into a narrow gully with tall, rocky hills on either side. Just about the middle of this gully his horse reared up with a mad jump which would have unseated an Eastern rider. Sloane, however, clung to the saddle with that ease and agility which seem to be the inheritance of all plainsmen, and keeping a heavy hand on the rein, brought his animal down on all fours again.

"Gol-durn yer rotten hide!" he muttered. "Does yer wanter kill me? Wot does yer mean by rearin' up like that anyhow?"

Two figures had appeared out of the darkness before him, and the figures of other men and horses could be discerned behind them.

"That you, Sloane?" queried a sharp, nervous voice, and Earl Rossiter stepped forward to the side of the messenger.

"It's me all right," said Sloane, sulkily, "but ye needn't hev jumped out on me so gol-durned suddent. I come gol-durned near gittin' throwed an' kilt."

Rossiter paid no attention to Sloane's complaint. His face was pale and eager, pointed and meager-looking in the ghostly light of the rising moon, which was half obscured by the wisps of clouds which hung low about the horizon.

"Did you see him? Did you give him the message?" he asked.

Sloane slipped out of the saddle and kicked his horse viciously in the ribs.

"Take thet, yer gol-durned maverick!" he said. "Yes, I saw him all right."

"And gave him the message, just as I told you?"

"Sure! Gol-durn this animle! I'll tan him so's he's one raw welt from shoulder ter buttock."

"Never mind the horse. Did he say he would come? Did he seem suspicious?"

"I did it all right, so what's the use of questionin' me?"

"There's a whole lot of use."

Earl Rossiter took a step closer to Sloane and thrust his face into his.

"I hired you to go through this job," he hissed, "and I paid you well for it. I'm going to have you do just what I tell you, whenever I please. Understand?

I'm not going to take any back talk from you. Understand?"

Sloane cast a glance, at first sulky and then frightened, into Rossiter's determined face, and then understood.

"I fooled him all right," he said, in a more respectful tone. "He said he was coming along right after me."

"Very well, then," said Earl, "take your horse back and hobble him. And get the fire lit under that tar. You have some tar in that pot there, haven't you?"

"Sure," said Sloane. "It was cached near here so it come in right handy when I knowed what yer wanted with me an' ther other boys. We used it here puttin' marks on some sheep when there uster be a sheep ranch around here. Gol-durn this yere horse! It's a vicious animile, ef ever there was one."

"Take it back and hobble it," said Earl, "and get the tar ready. There's no time to lose."

Sloane led his horse away, muttering about its perversity of temper. As he did so, Sam Reading stepped forward out of the darkness and looked at his companion.

"It's all right," said Earl. "Ted Strong is coming along in a few minutes now. Those three fellows who came with Sloane, and whom we paid for the job, are busy working up the tar. They have it behind the hill there where the fire and what little smoke they make when they are melting it won't show."

Reading cast a half-frightened glance into his companion's face. It seemed to him sometimes that Rossiter had a touch of insanity. The glee with which he was now speaking, the expression of eagerness, and the gloating and evil smile that showed on his face when he spoke of tarring and feathering Ted Strong was absolutely blood-curdling.

"By Jove!" he muttered, "this is a pretty serious thing if we shouldn't get away with it."

"I have some masks for our faces," said Earl, "so that if he sees us even in the light he won't recognize us. We'll make a sorry spectacle of him. We'll leave him back at the Sunset Ranch among all his girl friends and those worshipers of his, the young rough riders, coated with tar and feathers and howling in agony. That's a revenge worth having. I can hardly wait till he gets here."

Reading shuddered a little at his companion's words.

"Are you sure that we can carry it through all right?" he asked. "It's a mighty serious business, and this fellow Strong has a great reputation as a fighter."

"Are you afraid of him?"

"Not a bit!" blustered Reading, "but I want to be sure and safe."

"I hope you are not weakening now at the last moment. By Heaven! if you should go back on me the way the others have done I believe I could kill you."

Reading edged uneasily away from his companion.

"You needn't glare at me that way or talk to me that way, either," he said. "I am in this thing with you, and I promised to go through with it. I always keep my promises. I promised myself to get square on Ted Strong and I am going to do it. No one ever knew Sam Reading to go back on his word."

"All right," said Rossiter; "you are a fellow after my own heart. We are five to one. There's no chance of failure this time. Heavens! so many plans to nail this fellow have failed that it seems almost too good to be true. But there's no chance of failure this time. No matter how good a scrapper he is, he can't do anything against five of us when we take him by surprise. Sloane and his two friends are men to be trusted. They are members of Roaring Bill's old gang, which was put out of business by Ted Strong and his young rough riders."*

"You can't depend too much on men of that stamp," said Reading. "They have no honor and are just as likely to turn against you if they see that the other people are winning out."

"These fellows won't turn against me. They know me too well. I know all about their old gang. I have had many talks with Bill Reynolds—Roaring Bill they used to call him because he spoke in such a soft voice—their leader. I know enough about these fellows to

*See No. 6 of the Young Rough Riders Weekly.

land all three of them behind the bars, where Ted Strong landed Roaring Bill and Cheyenne Dick, his right-hand man. They know that I know it, and that I know how to use my information. No fear of their turning on me. They are afraid of me—every man of them is afraid of me."

At this moment Sloane stepped up with the announcement that the tar was in readiness, and that a figure had been sighted coming forward through the brightening moonlight on horseback.

"It's Ted Strong, all right," said Sloane. "I know him by those soldier clothes of his and by the way he wears his hat."

"All right," said Earl, handing out pieces of black cloth with holes cut in them for the eyes. "Here are your masks. Get them on, and get ready, and be sure that this man doesn't get wind of what we are up to, or doesn't get a chance to fight us. We want to give him all that's coming to him."

CHAPTER VI.

ALL THAT WAS COMING TO HIM.

Figures rushing out upon him from the side of the trail! A flash of firearms almost in his face! A blow on the head that made his senses reel and sent a thousand stars dancing before his bewildered eyes! Hands grasping savagely at him in all directions! A wildly rearing horse and a rope that tightened about his breast and dragged him backward out of the saddle!

Ted was conscious of these things all at once. His mind took in the fact that he was being attacked, and almost in the same instant of time he realized that Sloane's message had been a hoax calculated to lead him into this very trap. He was down on the ground, struggling, trying to draw a revolver with one hand, lashing out fiercely with the other. He was on his knees and up again. His senses were reeling, but he was still fighting savagely. Masked faces danced before his eyes, and it seemed as if a host of spirits had set upon him. The wrist of his hand was grasped so tightly that he could not draw his weapon, and a terrible blow in the face sent him reeling. He was on his knees. Now he was on his feet. Men, masked and black, with wild eyes staring through the holes in the masks, were all about him, striking at him, kicking and pushing, trying in every conceivable way to do him injury. His right fist lashed out like a battering ram and landed right in the center of one of the masks, and a groan followed. Some one struck him from behind. Hands had gripped his throat. Some man seemed to be actually climbing on his back, struggling with all his weight upon his shoulder. Others were in front of him, pushing him backward. He felt every muscle in his body strained this way and that. Shattering blows that seemed to weaken and sicken him were landing on him from all directions. He was smothered and choked. He felt his back bending backward—further and further—down, down he went in a dusty heap, with a terrible crash on the ground. Men piled on top of him, struggling and fighting to strike him.

Then suddenly the weight on his breast was lightened and he was lying alone on his back, his ankles tightly bound and his arms pinioned to his sides, powerless to move hand or foot, his head spinning dizzily and every thew and muscle in his whole body aching with a pain that seemed more than he could bear.

The sudden cessation of the struggle, the sudden stoppage of all movement, the finding that he was without power to stir from his position, seemed like a calm after a tornado. How long he lay there he did not know, but after some interval of time he was picked up and carried, up hill he thought, and then down hill again.

Ted felt sick unto death. The bruises he had received, the hammering he had been through, had left him sweating in weakness and pain, and when he was deposited on the ground again, he closed his eyes with a feeling of utter helplessness and weariness; he would have welcomed almost anything that gave him peace and quietude. He felt some one fumbling about his belt, and then was aware that his revolvers were being taken away. He wondered vaguely what had become of his horse, Black Bess—whether it had been shot down in the fire that had flashed before his face at the opening of the attack, or whether its

rearing had been through sheer fright and it had been able to gallop away in freedom. He hoped it had.

"Kit Summers will have the horse," he thought. "He will treat it well."

Strange to say, the beating had taken all personal feeling out of him. He did not care much what might become of himself. He was not even curious to know who those were who had attacked him in such cowardly fashion. He was filled with a dull, painful listlessness. His thought for his horse, the faithful animal which had borne him so far, was more powerful in his mind at that moment than any personal wish.

As the man who had disarmed him stepped away, however, he felt his senses coming back to him somewhat. He tugged furtively at his bonds and found them fast. He opened his eyes and was conscious of the leaping, yellow glare of a nearby fire. His hearing came back and he knew that there were several men about him talking. He tried to sit up, but failed. A short, harsh laugh came from somewhere in front of him, and the words in a voice which was hard and strange, yet familiar:

"Set him up and let him see what is coming to him."

Powerful hands seized Ted by the shoulders and raised him to a sitting position so that his back was leaning against a perpendicular surface of rock.

Before him was a blazing fire, over which, supported by a tripod, hung a great black pot. From it came a hissing and bubbling sound that mingled with the noise of the roaring flames. On either side of the fire, with their backs to a small, natural amphitheater of rock, crouched two black-clad figures, their faces hidden by black masks which hung far below their breasts, and their eyes glinting queerly through the holes in the masks in the yellow light of the fire.

Directly in front of him stood another masked figure, upright. Ted could only see his eyes and his hands, which were so tightly clinched that the knuckles shone white through the sun-browned skin. His eyes were blazing with an absolutely fiendish light, and the glare from the fire made them shine yellow and opaque like the eyes of a cat.

This figure was looking at him, and, as he sat there, came a step nearer.

"Ted Strong," it said, "do you know into whose hands you have fallen?"

"Into the hands of a set of cowardly scoundrels," said Ted, in clear, ringing tones, full and manly, contrasting with the hissing voice of the one who had addressed him.

The figure drew itself upright and laughed. Ted shuddered as he heard that laugh. It was like the laugh of a maniac or of some person who was on the verge of insanity through brooding too long on some wrong or disappointment. It contained far more cruelty than the loudest outburst of wrath or anger could have conveyed, more hints of danger to come than a torrent of menace or invective.

"Into the hands of scoundrels!" it repeated, mockingly. "Perhaps so. But into the hands of your enemies. You will never know who we are. But this night you will suffer enough indignity to change your whole life. You will be stripped to the skin and flayed till the blood runs. You will be tarred and feathered till you scream with fright. You will be humiliated and degraded and sent back to your friends a sorry sight, fit only for contempt and disgust. Men, seize the prisoner and strip him of his clothes!"

CHAPTER VII.

TED STRONG'S TRIUMPH.

Ted Strong was dragged up out of his sitting position and placed on his feet. The slight rest he had enjoyed had allowed him to recuperate somewhat from the beating he had received. His head was still singing from the blows that had struck him there, and he was conscious of numerous bruises and sore spots on his limbs and body; but the strength had returned once more to his nerves and muscles. The dreadful lassitude he had felt when he was laid out and bound had left him now and his active brain was as cool and keen as ever, casting about cunningly for means of escape from his fearful predicament. He was curious to know who the masked figures were. Only one of them,

the fellow standing upright before him, had spoken. His voice had been queer and shaky, as though its owner had been suffering from some nervous strain, but he recognized something familiar.

As he was set on his feet, the bonds around his ankles were loosed and he was allowed to stand comfortably and firmly. He turned his head around at the same time and saw that other masked figures had collected behind him, slinking in to the circle of the firelight, by ones and twos, until there were fifteen men there altogether. Although he could see the faces of none of these men, he knew from the way that they swung their arms and from their peculiar, rolling, slinking gait, that they were men used to the saddle—cowboys and plainsmen in all probability.

"Untie his hands," continued the masked figure who was facing Ted Strong. "Untie his hands and strip him to the skin. There will be no use in your struggling. You can look around you and see that there are enough men to overmaster you."

Ted looked neither to the left nor right.

"Who are you?" he asked, boldly. "What have you against me?"

The masked figure laughed.

"Never mind who I am," he continued, sneeringly. "I would like to let you know just to make my revenge the sweeter, but it will be safer to keep this mask on. Then you will not know whom to blame for your troubles. And, besides, the very fact that you want to know makes me determined that you shall not know. I don't want to gratify a single wish of yours. I want to hurt you in every way I can. You'll never know who I am."

"Won't I?" cried Ted. "I'll know now!"

He leaped forward at the moment that the men had unbound his hands, and with a lightning movement tore the mask from the form of the figure before him. Beneath it was the pale face of Earl Rossiter, drawn and haggard, animated by the bitterest expression of hate that it is possible to conceive of upon a human countenance, and wearing a look of unholy joy and satisfaction in the revenge that he was taking.

A second later Ted was sent staggering to the ground by a shower of blows that were rained upon him by several of the figures that rushed forward. He was dragged to his feet again, but now the men who were guarding him clasped him firmly by either wrist.

Earl Rossiter stood facing him.

"That's right," he said, "hold him fast. He's a dangerous customer. Now you know who your enemy is, Ted Strong."

"I knew all along who was my worst enemy," said Ted, "but I supposed that you were still in bed, sick."

"You supposed, eh? Now I'll give you a chance to do some more supposing. Suppose that I plunge you into that pot of tar and then give you a coat of feathers."

Ted suddenly broke into a wild yell, a cowboy, long yell, which all his young rough riders knew, and which he was sure they would recognize as his cry for help if they chanced to be started back on their way to the Black Mountain Ranch. On the still prairie air, he knew that it would carry for a tremendous distance, and he also knew that Bud Morgan, owing to his long training on the plains, had developed considerable skill at following the direction of sounds.

He was once more thrown down. Hands were placed over his mouth, other hands were grasping at his throat, he was choking and gasping for breath, but he struggled madly to free himself, anxious to yell once more if possible.

Earl Rossiter stepped a little nearer to the struggling heap of men of which Ted was the center. The young rough rider seemed to be filled with the strength and fury of ten men. He kicked and fought and plunged madly, apparently with no design or no idea beyond fighting blindly. In reality, however, he had his eyes fixed on his revolver, which had been carelessly thrown on the ground a little way from his feet. He was groping for it madly, by shrewd movements bringing the struggling mass of men nearer and nearer to it without allowing them to see what his plan was.

At length his hand grasped it, and the trigger was pulled thrice before it was snatched away from him. The three shots sounded loudly above the noise of the

struggle, and a few moments later, when the men were engaged in getting the pistol out of his reach, Ted got his mouth free for a moment and yelled again. Then he was gagged by means of Rossiter's black mask, which was stuffed into his mouth and securely fastened behind his neck, and he was dragged to his feet once more.

"You see there is no use in your struggling," said Rossiter, coolly. "You haven't a chance in the world. I want revenge on you, but I want to show you first that I have beaten you at the last. For many months there has been a contest between us. You thought, you fool, that you had beaten me that time I took sick, that I would knuckle down to you and acknowledge that I was beaten. You thought that once before up at the Blackfoot Agency, but you found out your mistake to your sorrow. You thought several times that you had me beaten, but I want to show you that you can't beat me. I want to punish you, but I want to humble you still more. I am going to tar and feather you anyway. But besides that I am going to flog you across your bare back till the blood runs down. I am going to make you scream and beg for mercy."

He paused and gazed into the eyes of the young rough rider, hoping to find some sign of terror there. Instead he was met by a defiant glance of those steady brown eyes which told him that Ted Strong was still firm nd undismayed.

"Bring me that rawhide lash!" he commanded, shortly.

One of the men handed him a heavy rawhide whip such as is used in driving cattle, heavy and solid at the butt and tapering to a slender point, re-enforced by strands of brass wire cunningly woven in with the hide. Such a whip is used to manage an unruly cow, and it will bite deep and sting through the hide of the toughest bull in Texas. Ted knew what a weapon that was better than an Eastern boy could.

"Now," said Rossiter, "I am going to lash you once or twice with this to see how you bear it. This is just a preliminary."

Swish! The whip hissed through the air and coiled like a serpent around one of the legs of the young rough rider. The man who held him on that side cried out in pain. The whip had just flicked him in passing. Ted's body bent a little with the agony, but outside of this slight convulsive movement, he showed no signs of fear or trepidation.

Again the whip hissed and descended, and then Rossiter drew back.

"I have just given him a touch of it," he said. "I want to make him beg my pardon. I want to make him acknowledge that I am his master and that I have beaten him and humbled him in the end. If he will humble himself to me and beg for mercy, I will spare him the flogging. He gets the coat of tar and feathers, the ride on the rail to the door of Sunset Ranch anyway. I will make him a laughingstock for all his admirers, for all those who bow down to him and worship him."

Earl Rossiter turned suddenly and glanced around among the masked figures.

"Reading," he said, "where are you? I want you to take your revenge. I have let him know that you are a party to this because he knows that I am, and so we are both in the same boat there. He struck you and smashed your face. I want you to go up to him now and strike him as he struck you. Just smash his pretty countenance while he stands there bound. Just smash him to your heart's content. You are a boxer. Use him for a punching bag. We have him hard and fast here, and we are going to make the best of this opportunity while it lasts."

Rossiter looked around to the left and the right, but no trace of Reading could he see. The men whom he had hired for this attack on Ted Strong shifted uneasily from one foot to the other and glanced about also through the eyeholes in their black masks.

"Where is Reading?" asked Rossiter. "I can't see him anywhere."

"His pony's gone," said one of the men; "he must hev took a sneak while we was a-fightin'."

"Look for him."

Such of the men as were not engaged in holding

fast to Ted Strong busied themselves in obeying Rossiter's command. But they could find no trace of Sam Reading. The man was gone and so was the horse he had ridden.

Rossiter at length ordered them to desist from their search.

"He's nowhere about here," he said, irritably. "If he were we would have seen him before this. He's a coward like the rest of them. If he had had the heart of a chicken in him he would have stayed here and watched me have fun for a while. He was afraid that Ted Strong might discover that he was among this crowd and then he might have had to suffer for it afterward. That's the style of a whole lot of these college men. A lot of talk and wind, but precious little courage. He makes me tired. Are any of the rest of you afraid? Do any of you want to back out? You all said that you wanted to get square with him for breaking up Roaring Bill's old gang and sending a lot of your pards to jail. Are you getting weak-kneed about it now?"

"We are in it fer keeps," said one of the men. "We hev got just as much agin' thet young feller as you hev, an' we wanter see him get a good hazin'. Him an' his young rough riders hev been carryin' things with a purty high hand lately so's thet when some of us boys wanted ter shoot up ther town, er rough-house things a little bit, it wasn't safe ter do it. We wanter throw a scare inter them there fellers. Yer kin jest put us down fer thet."

"This yere feller Reading might hev run off to tip some of Strong's friends what was a-gettin' done ter him," said another of the men.

"No fear of that," said Rossiter, with a sneer. "Reading is too precious careful of his own hide for that. If he put any of Ted's friends next to this business he must know that he would be implicated in that. He can't afford to do it without injuring himself, and you can trust that fellow to take care of himself at all hazards."

"Wot do we keer about thet anyways" said the man who had spoken first. "Ther young rough riders is back at Sunset Ranch all right, but ain't we more in number than wot they is? We kin wipe 'em offen the map ef they tackle us now. They're only a passel o' kids as ought to be sent home an' whipped. They ain't no bystanders around to help 'em now, an' ef they should come up, we'd teach 'em a precious good lesson. Your Mexicans ain't a-goin' ter ride down here from Sunset Ranch ter help 'em."

"I guess not," said Rossiter, "so we'll proceed. You fellows are armed, and if the young rough riders do appear you know what to do."

"You bet we do," said one of them, emphatically; "they've done me a bad turn in sendin' my brother ter jail, an' I'm ripe fer 'em."

"All right," said Rossiter, "set that prisoner's mouth free. I don't care if he tries to yell. We can handle him and the young rough riders, too."

Ted was unbound from the cloth which half covered his head and face.

"Now," said Rossiter, gazing at him with his cruel eyes, "you can yell if you want to. I don't care. I am going to make you surrender to me and admit that I am the better man."

He raised his whip and cut at Ted with it. Ted struggled madly to free himself from the cords which had been bound about his wrists once more. But it was no use. The pain caused by the whip lash was terrible. Rossiter lashed out once more with it and then stepped back, his face twisted into a diabolical smile. Ted staggered a little, exhausted with his efforts, and nearly fell.

"Pick him up and steady him," said Rossiter, and his commands were obeyed.

"Now," said Rossiter, going up close to him and looking him in the eyes, "I want you to surrender. I want you to knuckle down to me and admit defeat. Otherwise you will be stripped naked and flayed. Do you give in?"

Ted's answer was a defiant "no," and Rossiter stepped back feeling that, after all, Ted Strong had triumphed and not he.

"Strip him!" he said, "and I'll lash him till the blood runs."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DANCE AT SUNSET RANCH.

There was a sort of drop in the festivities at Sunset Ranch house when Ted Strong bade them farewell and trotted away on his little black pony. Daisy Miller very plainly showed that she was disappointed that Ted had gone. Louise may have felt the disappointment quite as much, but she concealed her feelings more. It was natural for her to keep up a certain reserve as it was natural for Daisy to show every emotion on the spot.

A waltz followed shortly after Ted's departure, and Louise had Kit Summers for her partner. Everyone in the room noticed what a handsome couple the two made—Kit with his dark hair and dark eyes, and Louise with her blond coloring that made her noticeable wherever she went. Bob Martin danced with Daisy, and in a very few moments had her laughing again. Daisy was quite fond of the companionship of the little fellow because of his flow of humor and high spirits, and, no matter how blue she felt, Bob could always cheer her up. Beanpole was refused a dance by a very fat buxom girl to whom he had taken a violent fancy and who had already chosen Carl Schwartz for her partner. Thaddeus went away, muttering gloomily, to where Ben Tremont was lounging in a corner near a window with his head thrust altogether outside.

"Look out there," said Beanpole, joining him, "you'll catch cold sitting that way with your head out in a draught."

Ben brought his head in a moment and glanced at Beanpole, then thrust it out again hurriedly.

"I'm having a quiet smoke," he said. "If I went outside all by myself they would think it queer, and I haven't any use for dancing. I'd rather, a heap sight, lounge about here and smoke. I don't want to smoke in the room where the ladies are, and so I keep my head outside the window while the rest of my person remains within the room. See? Q. E. D."

Having delivered himself of this speech, which was an unusually long one for him, Ben thrust his head out of the window and betook himself to smoking again with renewed assiduity.

"It's dangerous all the same," said Beanpole. "But I don't care whether I catch cold or not, to-night. My system is all run down, anyhow."

"Humph!" was Ben's rejoinder to this mournful statement.

Beanpole stood at the window ledge beside Ben and thrust his head forth also.

"I'm getting desperate," he said. "My health is simply on the hog, and I am getting so thin and pale that the girls won't dance with me."

"Lucky boy!" said Ben, between puffs.

"It's a darned shame," went on Beanpole. "I feel that appendicitis is stealing over me. I'm getting weaker and weaker every day. And then when Jane Cummings turned me down to go and dance with Carl Schwartz, who doesn't do anything when he waltzes but spin around like a top—well, it simply makes me sick of life and everything in it. I believe I will simply stop trying. I'll just give it up. I'll let my constitution take its natural course and carry to an early grave a being who was always too delicate to take any enjoyment out of life."

"Don't do anything rash," said Ben Tremont.

"Rash!" cried Beanpole. "I am ready to do anything! I actually believe that I will stop taking medicine."

"Good thing if you did," said Ben.

"Yes," sighed Beanpole. "I suppose it would be a good thing."

The boys remained silent for a little time after this, looking quietly out into the great, starry night. Each became absorbed in his own thought and after a time began to forget about the smaller things of life and think more of the greater. Beanpole forgot his imaginary ailments, and Ben let his pipe go out—both forgetful of everything but the majestic beauty of the night and the stately march of the glittering planets over their heads. Presently they forgot about the sky and stars, the night winds and the prairie scents, in a sound which was borne faintly to their ears.

They were listening intently, their ears strained and their faces puzzled, when the music within came to a standstill and the dance ceased.

"Whatever are those two boys looking at with their heads thrust out of the window?" said Daisy, as she sank into a chair near by.

"I guess I could make a safe bet on it," said Bob. "Beanpole is thinking how sick he is and worrying about his appetite because he didn't eat any more than three ordinary men to-day, and Ben is thinking what a fine thing tobacco is and what a stupid thing dancing is."

"I think that he is stupid himself for holding such opinions," said Daisy, "though he's nice, too. I like Ben, because he is so big, and strong, and quiet."

"Just like me," said Bob, doubling up his biceps; "but you can't blame people for having different tastes. You know what Shakespeare says: 'Let the cobbler stick to his last, for a last is the last thing anyone else would want sticking to him, and the lasts that stick the best are not the lasts that last the longest. The longest last that ever lasted could not outlast——' "

"Such nonsense," laughed Daisy. "Let's come over and see what they are doing."

They went up behind Beanpole and Ben, who were busily engrossed in the distant sounds that were wafted to them on the wind.

"What's up, brothers?" said Bob. "What's at the steer kimmer, as the Scotchman says, although I don't know what a steer kimmer is."

"Get Bud Morgan," said Ben, shortly. "I want him to listen. Some one is giving the long yell out on the prairie, and we heard shots."

Bud and Kit came to the window, but no further sounds came down the wind.

They looked at each other with puzzled faces.

"Funny thing to hear shooting out there," said Ben, knocking the ashes out of his pipe into the broad palm of his hand. "No one has any business to be shooting out there this time of night."

"Ted left here alone a short time ago," said Kit; "could it be——"

At that moment the door was flung open and Reading stalked into the room. He was in a perspiration; he was dusty and muddy as though he had ridden hard over holt and hollow, and his face had a frightened, scared look that impressed all who saw him.

"Where did you come from, and what makes you look that way?" asked Kit. "I thought you were in bed."

"I was out on the prairie, and I want to speak to some of the young rough riders in a hurry."

He stepped out on the porch, and the young rough riders followed him in a group, leaving the girls and other boys behind them.

Kit grasped him by the arm.

"What is it you have to say? Say it quick," he said. "Has anything happened to Ted Strong?"

"Yes," said Reading, with a queer sort of swallowing motion in his throat. "He's out there with a lot of fellows, enemies of his—Roaring Bill's old gang and Earl Rossiter—who are going to tar and feather him."

"Good heavens!" yelled Kit. "Get the horses!"

"Wait a bit," said Ben Tremont. "How does this man know about this?"

"I know about it. I was in the plot. Strong thrashed me, and Rossiter and I planned revenge. I only had intended to give him a laying out. But Rossiter seems to be crazy. He wants to half flay him with a whip, and he is going to tar and feather him."

"And you were in this plot!" yelled Kit. He sprang at Reading like a panther and was bearing him to the ground when Ben Tremont interfered and pulled him off.

"He backed out of it, and he is going to tell us where Ted is," said Ben. "The thing to do now is to help Ted, not to fight this man. Reading, can you guide us to the spot where they have Ted Strong?"

Reading nodded.

"Was that his shouting that I heard when I leaned out the window?"

"He was shouting and fighting with them when I rode away. I could stand it no longer. I determined

to make a clean breast of it and ride back and tell you fellows. I may have a bad temper, but there are some things that I can't stand for."

"Good heavens!" cried Kit; "Bob, Bud, Beanpole, Carl—the horses! Get them saddled up. Ted is being murdered."

Kit led the way to the stables, and the young rough riders followed at a run. It was generally understood that when Ted was absent Kit Summers, the dashing, dark-haired boy, was to act as his lieutenant and take command of the young rough riders. He proved himself, on this occasion, well qualified for the position.

"Saddle quickly, lads," he said, "and slip cartridges in your weapons. See that both cinch straps are pulled tight. Here, Reading, swing a lantern down so the boys can see."

In the narrow box stalls, by the flickering lantern light, the boys saddled up as speedily as they knew how, and the young rough riders, even though they are boys, can come pretty near the army record held by the Sixth cavalry at that game. Then the long cartridges were slipped into the weapons which ordinarily were kept unloaded, and they were slung in their holsters, ready for the hand. Each boy stood at attention at the head of his horse.

"Lead out!" cried Kit, and the boys, grasping the bridles, swung out doors in a line under the stars and rising moon. The girls and boys, gathered on the porch, could see them arrayed like a platoon of cavalry, warlike and ready.

"Reading," said Kit Summers, "get on the back of your horse and lead us straight to the place where you left Ted Strong. If so much as a hair of Ted's head is hurt, it will go hard with you and all your crew. Prepare to mount! Mount!"

At the last two commands, the boys placed foot in the stirrup and then leaped lightly into the saddle.

"Column of two—for'ard march!" Kit's voice rang out like the notes of a bugle, and a shrill cheer arose from the girls on the porch as the young rough riders swung out.

"Trot! Gallop!" cried Kit, and the young rough riders were away across the prairie.

CHAPTER IX.

TO THE RESCUE.

When Rossiter saw that no intimidation on his part could frighten Ted Strong, he felt an odd twinge of disappointment in his heart. Although he swaggered and boasted about having the young rough rider in his power, he knew, in his inmost soul, that the real victory, the real triumph which was the effect of courage and character rather than of brute force, belonged to Ted Strong.

"Strip him, boys," he said, stepping back a little. "Strip him. Take the clothes off his back and let me get at him. I'm glad he refused. I'm glad he's stubborn. It will make my revenge all the sweeter."

To strip Ted Strong of his clothes, it was necessary to untie his hands. Ted was calculating on this. As soon as the ropes were loosed, he swung outward with both his arms in as hard and wide a sweep as he could swing them. He used them as a swimmer uses his arms, only in Ted's case there were two hard fists at the end of the arms instead of open palms. At the same time he rushed forward blindly.

The two men who were holding him were sent staggering back, and another man, who was standing in front of him, received the full impact of Ted's shoulder as he charged him like a football player. Rossiter sprang at him, calling upon the others to follow. Ted dodged one man and went full tilt into Rossiter. Rossiter went down like a tenpin, and then Ted dashed past him, kicking the tripod that held the bucket of tar as he went.

Over went the tripod, and there was a great hissing as the tar it contained struck the flames and took fire. This had been carefully thought out, and for a moment the young rough rider was hidden from his enemies by the bright glare of the fire. Rossiter leaped to his feet and ran for him, but at the same instant Ted swung a great burning log out of the flames, poised it over his head in both hands, and sent it whirling into the crowd of men who were coming for him in a mass. They scattered and ducked on all sides.

The log struck one man fairly on the chest and sent

him down in a shower of sparks. For a moment the men were at a standstill unable to see far before them. The blazing tar sent up a great cloud of flame and smoke, and for a moment it appeared to Rossiter's gang that the young rough rider, in a paroxysm of terror, had dashed directly into the fire.

But such a thing was far from the thoughts of the quick-witted rough rider. Never had there been greater need for his shrewdness and quickness than at that moment, and never had he planned more wisely or executed more daringly. While Rossiter and his men were still trying to cross the river of burning tar that was in their path, he was away in the shadows on the other side, running like a deer for the coulee, where he had caught sight of a line picketed with horses.

They caught sight of him in a moment, and he could hear their cries and oaths, but he never turned his head to look. Then came the crackle of firearms and the splintering sound of bullets striking near his feet, the whizzing sound of them cleaving the air near his head. Still he ran like a deer, and, presently, he was among the horses. The men were all running for him now at top speed, but none of them had the fleetness of foot of Ted Strong.

They were afraid to fire now for fear of injuring their own horses, which were already leaping wildly and tugging at the picket line.

As they reached one end of the coulee, Ted Strong dashed out of the other, mounted. Bullets were flying about his head, as he swung out on the open prairie and headed his horse instinctively for Sunset Ranch He bent low over the neck of his animal and listened for the sound of hoofbeats behind him. They came fast enough. The men were enraged at the tough fight their captive had put up, and more determined to catch and tar and feather him than ever. They streamed out in the road in an irregular bunch, cursing and urging on their steeds, their pistols flashing fitfully as they fired upon the fugitive.

Ted had little fear of such wild shots. He had fears, however, about the speed of his own horse—the horse he had taken from the picket line. He had taken it at random, as he had no time to pick or choose, and now he noticed that the animal was not very speedy, that neither spurring nor coaxing could urge it to a faster gait than it had started with. He heard the hoofbeats sounding nearer to him and knew that the random shots were coming closer to him than before. The pursuers were not only getting his range; they were coming closer to him.

"Too bad," he muttered into the pony's mane as he lay forward on its neck; "I guess I have picked out the slowest horse in the bunch. Oh, for a weapon! I'd give anything for my revolver. I guess I could stop a few of those fellows who are after me. But this horse is tired. It can't hold out much longer."

He looked back, being careful the while to leave as little possible mark for his followers. He could see that Rossiter's gang was strung out into a long, irregular line. At the forefront rode a tall, lanky customer, mounted on a big roan, long legged and shad bodied, but evidently capable of great speed. Next to him came Earl Rossiter himself, mounted on his thoroughbred bay. Ted could tell it even at that distance.

The other outlaws were bunched a little behind, but stringing out more and more as the horses showed what they were made of for a long run.

"That first fellow is distancing all the others," muttered Ted. "He'll be a hundred yards ahead of Rossiter in a few moments. He's a fool to come at me alone, but I don't object. I've got a little plan up my sleeve yet. He thinks that because I am unarmed I am not dangerous. I'm not unarmed as long as I am on a horse. I can use a horse as a weapon as well as a gun. My animal is not very speedy, but he's sure on his feet, short, and a trifle heavier than that animal behind."

These thoughts were running through Ted's mind as he raced along. He watched and saw that the first of the pursuers was gaining more and more over the others.

"Good enough," he muttered, and glanced ahead.

There was a turn in the road not a quarter of a mile away, the road—or rather the trail, for it was

nothing more than a dimly marked track across the open prairie, swung around a clump of timber at this point, and for a little distance further was screened by the trees. Ted had been waiting anxiously as he rode, for this turn in the trail to come in sight. As he neared it, he drew forward in the saddle and caught the reins in a tighter grip.

As he rounded the turn he bent inward, forcing his horse to swing around in a large circle without slowing his pace in the least. The wideness of the trail, and the fact that there was absolutely flat, prairie land on the side of the trail, enabled him to do this. As he swung around, he listened. He heard the foremost horseman who had been leading the pursuit coming up to the turn. He swung around the clump of trees, and, as he did so, he met Ted Strong, the boy he was chasing, charging for him directly!

This was just as Ted had calculated. Ted's horse struck the other animal in the flank and struck it when it was a little off its balance owing to the turn. There was a crash, a grinding of leather and a cloud of dust. Then Ted's horse staggered on while the other tottered and fell to the ground, pinning its rider underneath it and knocking him senseless. Ted dropped from his own steed, and a moment later had in his hand the revolver of the man who had been chasing him. His belt of cartridges was still strapped around his body, so he was now armed and supplied with ammunition. But there was no time to lose. He vaulted to the back of his steed once more just as Earl Rossiter, leading the remainder of his followers, came swinging around the turn. Their pistols blazed with a sudden volley as they came around and caught sight of the dark figure of the young rough rider who had wheeled his animal once more and was riding away at the topmost speed at which it could carry him. Bullets sang on either side of him and sent spurts of dust from the ground before him. Ted Strong swung around a little in the saddle, rested his newly won revolver on his crooked elbow, and sent two shots back at those following him.

He could see one horse stagger as though it had been hit, but the others came on.

The figure of the man Ted had charged upon and thrown was still lying in the trail near the trees. Evidently the others had charged right past it without stopping to see whether the man were alive or dead. Ted felt his horse failing under him, and those behind were coming nearer and nearer. He was giving himself up for lost, for he knew that this chase could not last long, when suddenly his heart gave a great leap. Hoofbeats sounded on the trail ahead of him, coming his way. A line of mounted figures appeared suddenly in the moonlight. It was the young rough riders!

CHAPTER X.

THE CHARGE OF THE YOUNG ROUGH RIDERS.

Never in his life had Ted wished for his brave followers half so much as at that moment. Now, when he saw them coming toward him at a sweeping canter, he sat upright in the saddle, reckless of the bullets of his pursuers. The figures coming up the trail were simply black silhouettes in the moonlight, but there was no mistaking them. There was Kit, with his gallant upright bearing and firm seat in the saddle. There was Bud Morgan, lean and wiry, his mane of hair flying out on the wind as he rode like a standard. There was the powerful form of Ben Tremont, the short, fat form of Carl Schwartz, the tall, slim figure of Beanpole, with Bob Martin riding by his side. They were all there.

"Rough riders to the rescue!" yelled Ted. "Swing around in front of me, boys."

A moment later Ted was in the midst of his companions, and they had pulled their horses to a standstill. Some distance away on the trail, facing them, were Earl Rossiter and his men. Earl had given the word to check the pursuit when he saw the rough riders swinging along the trail. Now he sat his horse, biting his teeth, and cursing under his breath. Ted Strong had been in his grasp, he had been ready to take the revenge he had longed for, when suddenly the tables had been turned. Earl was pale with rage and trembling with the bitterness of his disappointment. For a

moment he looked steadily at the dark figures of the young rough riders. Then his rage boiled over.

"Come on, boys," he said; "there are fifteen of us. There are only seven of them there, and we outnumber them two to one. We have them now where they can get no help. It's time for squaring accounts. Come, boys! We'll wipe them off the face of the earth."

This speech suited the temper of the men to whom it was addressed. One and all of them had grudges against the young rough riders. Their blood was aroused by the excitement of the pursuit, the odds were in their favor. In a disorderly crowd they swung out into the road. They cheered hoarsely.

"Drive 'em back to Sunset Ranch!" yelled one.

"Wipe 'em clean offen the earth," cried another.

"Chase 'em outer ther State. We hev 'em now," cried a third.

Down toward the young rough riders they moved, riding each one according to his own fancy, each man struggling to be first to get in an effective shot against the young rough riders.

In the meantime, the rough riders, halted on the road in columns of two, waited in silence, as though turned to stone, for the orders of their commander. They could see Earl Rossiter's gang coming for them, and already several shots—the opening of the battle that was to follow—had been fired.

Ted, himself, saw that it had come to a pitched battle with his foes. He had two alternatives. He might run for the Sunset Ranch with the outlaws in pursuit and with a great likelihood of his horse breaking down under him and leaving him helpless, or he might face his assailants, hurl the young rough riders at them, and fight them with the odds two to one against him. He never hesitated.

"Open order!" he yelled suddenly, as the gang of outlaws came nearer.

The young rough riders, moving as though they had been automatons, wheeled and checked their horses, turned them this way and that amid a shower of bullets until they were strung in a single line across the trail. Then they came to rest again, every eye turned toward the figure of Ted, who rode out to one side, every hand on the butt of a revolver.

"Boys!" cried Ted, "we are face to face with our enemies, and we are going to fight them. Fire as you charge, but don't waste a shot. Fire at the horses. Trot! Gallop! Charge!"

At the last command a shrill yell came from the young rough riders. A splitting volley came from their revolvers. They urged their horses forward like madmen, each boy yelling his utmost.

The followers of Earl Rossiter saw the line of young rough riders bearing down upon them like a whirlwind. They heard the shrill yell which struck terror to their hearts, and saw the sudden spurts of flame as the boys fired.

Some were frightened and tried to draw out of the way of the charging line of boys. Others pressed forward all the faster. Bullets sang about their ears. One horse reared up wildly and fell backward—dead; its rider missing death himself, under the falling horse, by a very narrow margin. For a moment the advance was checked, and that moment decided the battle. The outlaws, mixed up in a confused mass, saw the young rough riders charging upon them with the fury of Indians and with the steadiness and order of a company of regular cavalrymen. With wild yells they broke and fled, this way and that.

They were struggling with each other to get away, when the line of the rough riders struck them. At another command from Ted Strong, the boys had all seized their heavy Colts revolvers by the long barrels. Now they used them like clubs, and at the topmost speed of their horses, crashed directly into the confused mass of their enemies.

"Forward, rough riders!" yelled Ted; "follow through! Cut them in two!"

For a moment there was a terrible confusion of horses and men. Boys and outlaws were fighting hand to hand. Ben Tremont could be seen swinging a carbine he carried like a club, and breaking a way for himself through the line of his enemies. For a moment it looked as if the young rough riders were to be borne back by the superior weight of their enemies. But it was only for a moment. Once more their cheer rang out and once more they spurred forward their steeds. This time it was a pursuit, for the outlaws were flying across the country this way and that, seeking concealment wherever they could find it, defeated and shattered by the band of boys they had thought to drive before them.

Three dead horses lay on the ground. Malone, the man who had brought the bogus message to Ted, lay beside one of them groaning, with a bullet through his leg. Following the instructions of their leader the young rough riders had tried to frighten rather than kill their enemies, to throw them into confusion by a well-directed fire rather than to shoot them down. They had succeded, for the outlaws were now panic-stricken and riding away for their lives in various directions.

The young rough riders gave chase until a shrill whistle from Ted Strong called them back. They found him bending over a white and apparently lifeless form on the ground.

It was Earl Rossiter, still and unconscious, a great bleeding gash across his forehead, the form of his horse which had been shot and had thrown him, lying near by.

Ted was bending over him wiping the blood from his forehead and pillowing his head on his arm as though the boy had been his dearest friend instead of his bitterest enemy.

"Get him across the back of one of the horses, Kit," said Ted, to his friend, who had pulled up beside him. "He has a terrible gash across his head, and we must get him to Sunset Ranch as soon as possible. One of the other boys must ride for a doctor right away. This boy has a fractured skull if I am not mistaken, and he may die if he doesn't get medical assistance right away."

"He doesn't deserve it," said Kit. "Not after the way he has treated you. Hang it all, if it was me I would let him lie there and take care of himself. He doesn't deserve any good treatment. He has shown that he doesn't deserve it."

Ted raised his head and looked his friend in the face.

"Kit," he said, "I'm ashamed to hear you talk that way. I didn't think that was your disposition. I didn't think you were that sort of a fellow."

Kit's dark eyes flashed angrily for a moment, but he did not speak. A little later he was riding for the doctor as fast as his horse would take him.

* * * * * * *

Three days later Earl Rossiter was lying in an armchair in the Sunset Ranch house. He was very pale and thin, and his head was still wrapped in bandages. The blow he had received on the head had not turned out to be a fracture as Ted had feared, but it had been so serious an injury that Earl would not be fully recovered from it for some time to come. Sitting by Earl's side was his cousin, Louise Rossiter; his father, a gray-haired gentleman with a lined, wan face, which at the present moment wore a very grave look.

Before Mr. Rossiter, piled up on the table, were a heap of documents and papers of all descriptions. He was sorting through them, laying some on this side and some on that. Presently he sat up and looked at his son.

"I find that your debts amount to some three thousand dollars," he said; "that you still owe Ted Strong five hundred dollars on a suit which he brought over some stolen cattle."

"Just about what I thought," said Earl, wearily. "I suppose you will have to pay it. I haven't a cent."

"As far as the cattle is concerned," said Ted, "I intend not to press that suit any further. It was only brought as a warning to the Sunset Ranch people that the Black Mountain Ranch was to be respected."

"Thanks," said Rossiter; "I don't see why you should want to do me any favors though, for I am sure I never did you any."

"Let me thank you in my son's behalf," said Rossiter himself. "I myself will see to it that in the future he incurs no debts whatsoever. He is going to go to a school in the East where he will be submitted to the closest surveillance, where he will be permitted to indulge none of the bad habits he has formed, where he will be compelled to work hard and live frugally. I realize that I myself am responsible for his present state, owing to the way I have brought him up and to the bad example I have set him. I am beginning to realize, although very late, that a man is responsible for the conduct of those about him, for no man can set an example, either good or bad, that will not influence some one. Now, I suppose, that all these papers have been gone over, we might as well withdraw and give my son the rest that he needs."

Louise and her uncle stepped outside. Ted was about to follow them, when Earl Rossiter called his name.

"Come here," said the sick boy, "I would like to speak to you."

Ted stepped over to the side of the boy who had been fighting him for so many months and looked down into his face. Earl looked up at Ted. There was no burning hatred in the eyes of the sick boy now. Only a look of sorrow and weariness.

"Well," said Earl, "you have beaten me. This is the end of the contest and this marks your triumph. I leave the West as soon as I am well enough to travel. I suppose you are glad."

"I am glad you have made up your mind to lead a more profitable life," said Ted.

He extended his hand toward Earl. "Shake hands," he said, "to show that, now it is all over, there is no hard feeling between us."

Rossiter made no move to take the proffered hand.

"I can never shake hands with you and mean it," he said. "You have beaten me now, but I feel it within me that some time again we shall meet and that then I shall be your enemy as I am now."

Ted turned away, stepped out of the room, and left Rossiter alone, watching the dying sunset and pondering over the ruins of all his plans.

THE END.

In next week's issue of the YOUNG ROUGH RIDERS you will enter upon a new phase of the career of Ted Strong and his friends. When Ted wound up affairs at the Black Mountain Ranch and started on the trail to Fremont, he little knew what dangerous and remarkable experiences he was about to undergo. In No. 31, of the weekly, entitled "Ted Strong In Kansas; or, The Trail to Fremont," you will find narrated the first of a series of adventures that marked a turning point in the boy's life. You will learn the history of the haunted ruin of the Tinaja Bonita and something of the strange man who inhabited it when Ted Strong entered it. You are destined to know more of Prof. Cowenhoven in the future, and in the next issue you will meet with him for the first time. This man, who later on pursued the young rough rider with the most malignant hate and who turned out to be the worst enemy he ever had, appeared to him first in the guise of friendship. Whether you have been a reader of the YOUNG ROUGH RIDERS from the first or not, you cannot afford to miss next week's issue. If you cannot get it from your newsdealer send to the publishers for it.

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